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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001218

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/09/2027

TAGS: PREL KDEM PGOV LE SY

SUBJECT: AOUNIST MP STRUGGLING TO PULL HIS BOSS BACK FROM  
THE DARK SIDE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) On 8/8, Aoun bloc MP Ibrahim Kanaan pleaded with the Ambassador for the USG to lighten up on Michel Aoun and also to help forge a genuine partnership between Aoun and the Hariri bloc. Aoun, who should be the best friend of America and the leader who can save Lebanon, risks being exploited by extremists because March 14 moderates and the USG slap him at every opportunity. It is not too late to bring Aoun back from the dark side, but he needs to see that a place remains for him at the moderate table. Kanaan also noted that, a moderate himself, he needs to be taken seriously by March 14, in order to help strengthen the moderate voices inside the Aoun camp. Separately, Siniora's senior advisor Mohamad Chatah, who has been the link between March 14 and Kanaan, said that Saad Hariri is not yet ready to open up to General Aoun. Chatah was sympathetic to Kanaan's reasoning but agreed with the Ambassador that Kanaan, while sincere, is also seeking to use March 14 contacts to increase his own importance to Aoun at the expense of Aoun's bombastic and annoying son-in-law, Gebran Bassil. End summary.

USG, MARCH 14 "SLAP" AOUN

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¶2. (C) Asking that the Ambassador see him urgently, Aoun bloc MP Ibrahim Kanaan on 8/8 argued that, with parliamentary by-elections behind Lebanon, it is time to work vigorously to build a real partnership between March 14 leaders, particularly Saad Hariri, and Michel Aoun. But instead of looking to build bridges, March 14 and the USG seek all opportunities to "slap" Aoun. Kanaan complained of what he saw as an unrelenting anti-Aoun campaign orchestrated by March 14 with the USG. The media comments on the new Executive Order were particularly stinging. Quoting some particularly choice recent comments by Michel Aoun (including our favorite, that the Metn election results showed that he beat George Bush, whose candidacy for a Metn parliamentary seat had somehow eluded us), the Ambassador argued that Aoun himself had contributed to a fair amount of the mud-slinging.

¶3. (C) Kanaan countered that, with Aoun under constant attack from moderates and Americans whose views he actually shared, he was moving ever more deeply into the extremist camp populated by pro-Syrians and Hizballah. This was not good for Michel Aoun, not good for Lebanon, and not good for the United States. Aoun's genuine beliefs actually make him

the best friend of America. But surrounded by anti-March 14 zealots and closed off from the U.S. and others, Aoun risked becoming more extreme himself. It is not too late to pull him back to where he naturally belongs, with the moderates, but he needs to see that there is genuine partnership. Kanaan rejected the Ambassador's concern that Aoun seems to be adopting increasingly racist anti-Sunni positions that place him far from the moderate center.

PROMOTING PARTNERSHIP  
CAN BRING OUT THE MODERATE IN AOUN

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¶4. (C) Kanaan argued that the USG should promote an Aoun-March "natural" partnership, by sponsoring meetings between himself and someone close to Hariri and PM Siniora, preferably Mohamad Chatah. The meetings should aim at a statement of principles that would guide a president and new government, including mom-and-apple-pie commitments to UNSCR 1701, the Taif accord, etc. If Aoun and the March 14 leaders each see that the other is willing to sign a document of shared principles, then the mutual fears each has of the other side trying to monopolize power subside. Competition becomes cooperation. The Ambassador asked whether Kanaan envisioned that statement of principles as essentially paving the way for an Aoun presidency or, instead, paving the way for Aoun to become a kingmaker for a president acceptable to March 14 who would govern according to the principles. Does the statement of principles promote a compromise or force March 14 into accepting an Aoun presidency? Uncomfortable with the question, Kanaan said that the issue of the presidency could "wait until the end."

. . . AND PROMOTING KANAAN CAN

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BRING OUT THE MODERATES IN AOUN CAMP

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¶5. (C) Kanaan also argued that he needed to be able to have something serious to show the Aoun camp in order to strengthen the moderates around Aoun. People know he meets with Chatah regularly, and "I have nothing to show for it." By contrast, those who work with Hizballah and the pro-Syrians can point to votes cast in the Metn and other specific examples of support. The Aoun camp risks being taken over from the inside by extremist elements if people like Kanaan can't show results of their diplomacy. Aoun sees very well who gets results and who does not.

CHATAH REPORTS THAT HARIRI  
NOT READY FOR OPENING TO AOUN

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¶6. (C) The Ambassador spoke by phone with Chatah later on 8/8 and then in person later while waiting for a meeting with the PM on 8/9. Chatah, who has repeatedly said that he likes and respects Kanaan, appeared sympathetic to Kanaan's pitch. But he said that MP Saad Hariri (who in July offered to meet Aoun but then never followed up with specific proposals, citing Metn elections as the excuse for the delay) is not yet ready to open up to Aoun. Chatah agreed that part of Kanaan's game is to try to position himself as more indispensable to the General than Aoun's annoying son-in-law Gebran Bassil (who has been responsible for bringing us initiatives like the Aoun-Hizballah alliance).

COMMENT

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¶7. (C) There are two schools of thought among March 14 stalwarts in terms of dealing with Aoun: those who believe in snubbing him, and those who hope to co-opt him. The "snub" camp includes virtually all March 14 Christians and, for now, Saad Hariri. They believe that boycotting Aoun drives him further into the arms of the extremists (as Kanaan

himself acknowledges), and that, the more extreme he becomes and the more extremist support he attracts, the more he declines in popularity and strength by shedding moderate Christian support. The "snub" camp delights in actions such as the endorsement by Druse thug Wi'am Wihab, perhaps the single most reviled figure in Lebanon (which is saying something), of Aoun's presidential ambitions.

¶18. (C) The co-opt camp is smaller -- and sometimes seems to consist of a single member, Chatah. But even the co-opt camp has few illusions about actually converting Aoun to adopting constructive positions. Instead, they think the best way to diminish him is by trying to work with him. Eventually, they predict, he will -- sure as the humus is ladled up in Hamra lunch joint -- inevitably launch into one of his crazed tirades against March 14. At that point, March 14 will be seen as the aggrieved party, stripping Aoun of the persecution mantle he now dons so fashionably.

¶19. (C) As for Kanaan, he does seem to be a relative voice of reason in an otherwise shrill movement. He has the virtue of posturing himself as a candid critic of his boss's foibles. Unlike the other Aounist self-styled "moderates" such as Farid al-Khazen and Ghassan Moukheiber, Kanaan -- at least for tactical reasons, to charm us, perhaps -- can get past the vigorous defense of everything Aoun says and does. We think Chatah should keep the door wide open to Kanaan. Even if the attempts to reconcile March 14 and Michel Aoun all fail, it would be useful if March 14 would provide some life rafts to those like Kanaan who might be lured to leap from what may become a sinking Michel Aoun ship. Kanaan and others should see that they have a place on the other side, even if Michel Aoun does not.

FELTMAN